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ABSTRACT

A "summary paper" can be defined as self-reported, written documentation of learning from a class or module. A clearly defined and well-written summary paper is an effective instrument for assessing the learning of adult students in higher education. Properly implemented, the summary paper accomplishes the following: addressing the particular learning principles related to adult learning; providing a valid criterion-referenced measurement; addressing assessment of higher order learning from Bloom's taxonomies; being sensitive to various learning styles; and allowing for the application of varied life experiences and intelligences. However, a summary paper is probably not the best method for testing. An individualized assessment that matches learning styles, intelligences, and life experiences to the subject matter would be ideal. Given pressures of time and documentation needs, however, a summary paper can be the most efficient and effective instrument for assessing learning outcomes in adult learners. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/KC)

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The Summary Paper

An Effective Assessment Tool for Adult Collegiate Learners

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Abstract: A clearly defined and well written summary paper is the most effective instrument for assessing the learning of adult students in higher education. Properly implemented, the summary paper addresses the particular learning principles related to adult learning; is a valid criterion referenced measurement; addresses assessment of higher order learning from Bloom's taxonomies; is sensitive to various learning styles; and allows for the application of varied life experiences and intelligences.

Defining the Summary Paper

The term "summary paper" as referenced in these pages refers to a self-reported, written documentation of learning from a class or module. The paper is a criterion-referenced measurement with clear curricular validity in its connectedness to particular learning outcomes. The summary paper assignment should be congruent with the stated learning outcomes for the class or module. Most typically, 3-5 major concepts, ideas, or learnings from the class/module will be addressed in the paper. A learner-directed selection from a list of viable alternatives allows the greatest opportunity for matching learning outcomes with individual expressions of significant learning.

Learning is assessed by the degree to which the learner addresses three critical questions. The first question is ***What have I learned?*** Because the focus of the paper is on 3-5 key learnings, the response to this question is not a regurgitation of the total digested nuggets of wisdom from the class/module, but a clear statement of the personally relevant knowledge and insight gained from the readings and classroom activities.

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[1] Spring Arbor College began offering degree completion programs for adult learners in 1983. Since then, adult degree-completion programs designed by Spring Arbor College have been implemented by colleges across the country. Summary papers are the primary means of assessment for the degree programs offered in these programs. Continuous evaluation and institutional assessment have validated both the reliability and effectiveness of summary papers in assessing the accomplishment of learning outcomes.

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The second question, ***How did I learn it?***, addresses the need for documentation of particular readings, discussions, activities, etc. which provided the framework for the learning identified in response to the first question. The portions of the summary paper which address this question will be concerned both with a further identification of the learning involved and an understanding of how the learning took place.

The final question is ***What difference does this learning make?*** Learner responses to this question meet the need of the adult learner for practicality in their educational experience as well as illustrating the critical thinking of higher order learning in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Relevant application of the textbook and/or classroom to the adult learner's personal or professional life provides a "laboratory validation" of the learning under discussion. In contrast to a typical "research paper" which validates learning by someone else's experiences, the summary paper uses the crucible of the life application of the individual student to authenticate genuine higher order learning.

The summary paper (as defined above), while part of the learning activities of a course or module, serves to culminate and bring closure to the particular learning emphases of the course/module and help the learner take the learning to the "real" world. In addition to the content outlined above, the summary paper should demonstrate college-level writing and organizational skills throughout the paper.

Summary Papers and the Adult Learner

The foundational work of Knowles in the early 1980's was instrumental in defining an androgogical, learner-centered approach to adult education based on five key postulates concerning the adult learner (Knowles, 1984). While some theorists might provide their own unique twist, these five distinctives of adult learners have been affirmed by the continued research of many in the field of adult education (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Peters, Jarvis and associates, 1991; and Wlodkowski, 1993). The five educationally significant distinctives of the adult learner are (1) a desire for self-directedness, (2) the valuing of experience as a resource for learning, (3) a learning readiness connected with developmental and social values and roles, (4) a need for the relevant and timely application of learning, and (5) a motivational drive from within rather than from without.

The summary paper provides a unique opportunity for building on these uniquely adult perspectives on learning. The summary paper (1) provides significant opportunities for self-directedness in the selection and reporting of key learning, (2) values, and even draws upon, the individual experiences of the adult learner, (3) fits well with the learning readiness of the adult learner, (4) provides for the timely (almost immediate) application of learning, and (5) builds upon the internal motivation of the adult ready to write about what they have learned.

Summary Papers and Bloom's Taxonomies

While most educators would acknowledge that the structures proposed in Bloom's taxonomies[2] are "educationally, logically, and philosophically sound," attempts at objective testing methods for the essentially subjective nature of higher order learning have consistently failed (Payne, 1992). The more subjective nature of the summary paper, is a natural fit for authenticating higher order learning at both the cognitive and affective levels. While oral reports or Socratic dialogue might be equal or better forms of assessment for higher order learning, when the issues of classroom time, faculty time, and personal life application are added to the evaluation mix summary papers are the most natural and appropriate instrument for assessing the critical thinking and higher order learning of adult learners. An effective summary paper will give evidence of higher order cognitive learning (synthesis and evaluation) and often address higher order affective learning (organization and characterization of values).

Summary Papers, Learning Styles and Right Brain, Left Brain

Learning style theory stresses two very important truths that are often not stressed in tandem to the peril of both the student and the educational process. The learning style principles which must be held in balance are (1) that every learner has a learning style preference and (2) the best learning uses the complete "learning cycle" (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 1987). Both Kolb and McCarthy also emphasized the need for recognizing how both right brain and left brain activity can contribute to the learning process. This approach to learning also fits well into a summary paper approach to evaluation.

The first summary paper question (What did I learn?) addresses both the left brain recognition of an experience and the right brain initial reflecting/analyzing of that experience. The second question (How did I learn it?) takes the learner through the concept recognition or formulation (both right and left-brained) that is often referred to as assimilator and converger learning styles. The final question (what difference does it or will it make) moves the learner into the active experimentation and application of learning to his/her world using both left-brained analysis and right-brained experimentation and creative application.

Summary Papers and Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences has raised serious questions concerning traditional approaches to education, especially at the elementary and secondary level. Gardner's

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[2] Benjamin Bloom co-authored both a *Taxonomy of Education Objectives* which was subtitled *The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* and a second work subtitled *The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook II: Affective Domain*.

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most recent work identifies eight intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist (Checkley, 1997). While a summary paper approach to assessment stresses competency in linguistic intelligence, the freedom of individual illustration and application that is inherent in a summary paper allows and even encourages the learner to use other intelligences that have significance to them. For example, persons with musical intelligences might illustrate and/or apply their new learning by analogous references to music. This freedom in the summary paper permits the acknowledgement (if not the development) of multiple intelligences. The bold and creative instructor might even find ways to permit an individual's most developed intelligence to be a major part of the summary paper.

Summary Papers as a Testing Instrument

Summary papers are criterion-referenced measurements that address two key elements in criterion-referenced assessment: a clear, general description of learning outcomes and the application or illustration of that learning. Additional issues of test construction are positively addressed by the summary paper format. Relevance, objectivity, and specificity are addressed in confining the summary paper assignment to key issues of the module or class. Efficiency and fairness are enabled by the student's selection of the key concepts to be addressed and illustrated or applied. Balance and difficulty issues are met by requiring three or four concepts to be addressed *and* applied or illustrated from life. Discrimination issues as related to the content of tests are virtually eliminated in the student's self-selection (even from a prescribed set of options) of key concepts to be addressed. Other testing issues such as time restraints, emotional and physical readiness for testing, and motivation all seem to be at least mitigated by the self-paced (with a due date), take-home, learner-focused summary paper.

Final Thoughts

Is the summary paper the best method for testing? Probably not. An individualized assessment which matches learning styles, intelligences, and life experiences to the subject matter would be ideal. Pressures of time, students, and documentation all make the ideal an illusive goal for most educators. Perhaps a better question is: "Is the summary paper the most efficient and effective instrument for assessing learning outcomes in adult learners?" To this question, from the varied perspectives examined in these pages, the answer is an emphatic yes!

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